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ABSTRACT

Too often in teaching English to speakers of other languages, the patterns of intonation, stress, and juncture are neglected; as a result, the student's comprehension and power of expression are reduced. After the basic suprasegmental patterns are taught, the teacher should continue to teach the patterns which are useful in distinguishing meanings and in avoiding ambiguities. Several such patterns are definitely established and easily taught. This can be accomplished through exercises involving imitation, recognition of contrasting utterances, and production of contrasting patterns. (VM)

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# STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY AND THE SUPRASEGMENTALS

Norman C. Stageberg

The patterns of intonation and stress suffer neglect in ESOL teaching. Although a few textbooks present them systematically, by means of schemata and numbers, numerous textbooks make little or no mention of them, leaving these suprasegmentals to be learned by imitation, from the teacher or from tapes. Yet the student must attain a reasonably good command of them, not only because they aid ready comprehension but because they play an important role in the expression and control of meaning in spoken language. It is their absence in written language that is one of the sources of ambiguity.

Many structural ambiguities lurk on the printed page solely because a given sentence can take two suprasegmental patterns, each conveying a different meaning. For example, in

> What are we going to do then?

the ". . . do then" can be spoken as ". . . dó thên" or as ". . . dô thén . . ." The former means "do in that case," and the latter "do at that time."

Another example, taken from a Texas newspaper, shows how a slight change in the suprasegmentals can give a ludricous turn to the meaning:

> She manages Courtney, 3 months, and Todd, 5 years, and the family dog, Sanka, does the cooking and cleaning in addition to entertaining at their home.

The *New Yorker,* which picked up this gaffe, commented as follows: "His salads are on the hairy side, but he's a wonderful host."

Thus, after teaching the basic suprasegmental patterns, an ESOL teacher can profitably continue with those other patterns which are useful in distinguishing meanings and whose absence on the printed page will

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sometimes result in double meaning. A number of such patterns are definitely established, relatively simple, and easily taught. From among these I will present ten, through the ambigual grammatical situations in which they participate.

Situation: Adjective + noun + noun head

Example 1. Ahmed worked in a dirty language lab.

This ambiguity is caused by the overlap of two stress patterns. One stress pattern is secondary + primary stress, signaling a modifier + noun combination, as in *dírty lánguage, spécial educátion,* and *máin stréss.* The second is primary + tertiary stress, signaling a compound noun, as in *lánguage làb, educátion sùpplement,* and *stréss rùle.* This adjective-noun-noun pattern is of high frequency and may be illustrated by countless cases, such as

2. *Special education supplement* (NY *Times*),
3. *Main stress rule* (Chomsky),
4. *Inferior child care,*
5. *Japanese language expert,*
6. *Liberal college president,*
7. *Radical police talk.*

Situation 2: Separable verb, or verb + prep phrase

8. Roger slipped on his shoe.

If *on* is given secondary stress, then the sentence contains a separable verb *slìpped ón* and could be reworded as "Roger slipped his shoe on." But if *on* is spoken with tertiary or weak stress, then *on* is a preposition, and the sentence tells us where Roger slipped, namely, *on his shoe.* This situation may be further exemplified by

9. Wanted: capable woman to live in and care for house on large estate.
10. Nixon swore in his new cabinet.
11. Father will flip over this new reversible belt.
12. Sandy looked over her bare shoulder.

A more complex illustration of Situation 2 occurs in this sentence:

13. The thesis was passed on.

Let us begin with the active form of this sentence. The separable verb is seen in these two forms of the sentence: "The committee passed ôn the thesis" and "The committee passed the thesis ón." These sentences, when turned into the passive, read "The thesis was passed ón," meaning that the thesis was given to someone else. Now, back to the active form of the sentence with a change in the stresses: "The committee pâssed òn the thesis." Here the verb is *passed,* not *passed on,* and the predicate means "decided about the thesis." The passive of this sentence is "The thesis was pássed on."

Situation 3: Grouping by sustained terminal juncture (→)

14. Secretary about to be married urgently needs apartment.

A linear sequence of words may have more than one meaning, depending on how the words are grouped together. To group words, we must orally indicate divisions points or breaks, between groups. These points are known

technically as terminal junctures. One much-used terminal juncture is the sustained terminal juncture. It is symbolized by a level arrow (→). This kind of division is achieved acoustically in a simple way: one gives greater length to the preceding syllable that has primary stress. Thus, in example 14, a juncture after *urgently* is shown by greater length on the *ur-*. A different grouping would be shown by a juncture after *married*, indicated by extra length on the first syllable of *married*. Each of the next three examples, you will note, has two meanings, depending on where you place the sustained terminal juncture.

15. His work was drawn on largely by later dictionary makers.
16. Do you know what good clean fun is?
17. Smoking chief cause of fire deaths here. (headline)

The next example can be read three ways, depending on whether one places the sustained terminal after *Arab*, or after *deputy*, or after *chief*. And if no sustained terminal at all is employed, there is a fourth reading.

18. The Israeli city fathers appointed an Arab deputy chief engineer in charge of roads.

Situation 4: "More" + adjective + noun head (mass or plural)

19. The Republic of China has more modern planes and better pilots than the Communists.

In Situation 4, when the stress pattern is tertiary + secondary, e.g., *mòre môdern*, the *more* modifies the adjective. But when *more* has the extra length characteristic of secondary stress, e.g., *môre môdern*, then the *more* modifies the noun head. Examples of this situation are many, e.g.,

20. More famous people than you have walked these narrow streets.
21. We want more scholarly manuscripts.
22. *All* gives you more active cleaning power.

With *less* the situation is the same except that cases are not so abundant:

23. Their major concern was how to get less obsolete military equipment from the federal government.

Situation 5: Noun or adjective, + noun head

24. Have you read Conrad's *The Secret Sharer?*

Here again the stresses channel the meaning. With secondary + primary stress—*sêcret shárer*—the order is adjective + noun, and the phrase means "sharer who is secret." But if the stresses are changed to primary + tertiary—sécret shàrer—the order is noun + noun, and the meaning changes to "sharer of a secret." Further cases:

25. A uniform assessment was levied on all the waiters.
26. After a year of hard work and many mistakes, Herzog became a patient counselor.
27. Obesity pills are often prescribed by fat doctors.

Situation 6: "Had" + past participle

28. Jack had built a long sturdy bookcase with movable shelves along the south wall of the room.

*Have* is often an auxiliary, as in "Professor Throttleham had built a tool shed." It can also be a causative main verb, as in "Jack had a bookcase built," meaning that he caused a bookcase to be built. In the latter sentence,

we note, the part participle *built* is positioned after the object *bookcase*. But when the object is long, this postposition of the past participle is avoided; that is, we would not say "Jack had a long sturdy bookcase with movable shelves along the south wall of the room built." Instead, we would place the past participle *built* right after the causative *had*, as in example 28. Now then we have two structures represented by the words *had built* in example 28. In speech, there are kept apart by stress: the pattern *hàd bûilt* is used for the auxiliary + verb, and the pattern *hâd bûilt* is used for the causative. Two more examples:

29. The Jamoskis had removed the large wide-branched oak tree that used to shade the entire back yard.
30. The world situation which makes this possible is that the United States government seems willing to have passed along to it the onus and the burden in the non-European world which Britain no longer feels she can afford. (Here the contrast makes have passed the probable interpretation.)

Situation 7: "Since"—after or because

30. I haven't seen my brother since he moved away.

If the first clause is read with the normal sentence intonation of 2 3 1 ↓ and a primary stress on *brother*, producing a sentence break after *brother*, the *since* means "because." But if this intonation covers the entire sentence, with no break after *brother* and the primary stress on *awáy*, then *since* means "after."

Situation 8: "There"—expletive or adverbial

31. There are two girls you should consider dating.

In a context like this, when *there* is read with weak or tertiary stress, the word is an expletive. But when it is given secondary or primary stress, it is an adverbial of place.

Situation 9: Stress for restrictiveness

32. The industrious Chinese → dominate the economy of Ásia.

In a sentence like this the adjective can be either restrictive or non-restrictive, depending on its stress in the noun phrase. With *indûstrious Chinése* we have the normal modifier + noun stresses, and *industrious* is therefore a non-restrictive modifier, so that the sentence means something like "The Chinese are industrious and they dominate the economy of Europe." But if *industrious* is spoken with a stronger stress than Chinese, then *industrious* becomes restrictive and the sentence means "Those Chinese who are industrious dominate the economy of Europe." Likewise:

31. The quarrelsome Arabs want another war.

Situation 10: *-Self* pronouns

33. One of the things I shall have to teach myself is not to be ashamed of manual labor.

The *-self* pronouns have several uses, two of which we shall consider here. One use is to intensify a noun or pronoun, as in "I mysélf will teach the lesson." Here the *-self* morpheme carries primary stress. In this use the *-self* pronoun can be placed later in the sentence, and when this is done, it carries with it the primary stress, thus: "I will teach the lesson mysélf."

A second use of the *-self* pronouns is to serve as a complement of the verb, as in "I taught myself a lesson." This is known as the reflexive use. *-Self* pronouns used reflexively carry a stress lower than primary, often a secondary stress. Ambiguity will occur in the written form of English

when the reader cannot tell whether a given use is intensive or reflexive, as in example 33 above. But in the spoken form of English the two meanings are kept apart by stress. In example 33, for instance, *myself* with a primary stress is intensive but with a secondary stress is reflexive.

A knowledge of the suprasegmentals used in the above ten situations, and in other situations as well, can help students to speak and write with greater accuracy and then to read and listen with better comprehension.

The difficulty in teaching these suprasegmental patterns will depend in part on the native language of the learner. For example, a native speaker of Japanese, which has phonemic stress, will have less difficulty, *ceteris paribus*, than a speaker of Amharic, a language of level stress.

Once the learner has made an initial acquaintance with American stress, pitch, and juncture, he can be given several kinds of exercises, such as these.

A. Imitation. Oral imitation of the teacher's pronunciation, or of taped utterances. Care must be taken here to link a given pronunciation with the meaning it conveys.

B. Recognition of contrasting utterances. For instance, a pair of contrasting sentences like

His brown cóat → particularly needs préssing,
His brown coat particularly → needs préssing,

can be randomly dispersed in an exercise and be presented for recognition.

C. Production of contrasting patterns. The written form of a sentence can be presented, with instructions to say it so as to produce a particular meaning. For example:

His brown coat particularly needs pressing.
"Read aloud to express the idea that it is his coat but not necessarily his trousers that needs pressing."
"Read aloud so as to express the ideas that his coat needs pressing but may not need cleaning.

Experimental evidence seems to indicate that production enhances recognition; thus the general practice of teaching recognition before production need not be followed.

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